Design Sense

A newsletter on Packaging, Product Styling, Store Planning and Merchandising trends
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MARKETPLACE ISSUE

THE NEW SHOPPING TOWN

. . . a return to the marketplace

Every retail establishment serves a dual function. From the point of view of the owner, the primary job of the store is to make a profit.

But no store can actually make profits unless it fulfills its more fundamental function of providing a marketplace for buyers and sellers.

This is the fact, whether consciously considered or not, that lies behind every decision made to improve the efficiency of retailing establishments. It is the basic core of the entire history of retail selling.

But let us consider for a moment what the concept of "marketplace" has meant.

In the Greek agora and the Roman market, under balmy skies, the populace heard philosophic debate, was entertained by parade and drama in the shadow of classic temples and monuments.

The medieval fair towns served as a meeting place for people from many countries, where students, apprentices, master craftsmen learned more about their crafts and arts, and were amused by strolling players, magicians and mimes.

In pioneer America, the peddler carried news and information to relatively immobile, widespread communities. The general store, at a later date, served as a limited central market and in addition as a kind of community club house where the consumers provided their own "cracker barrel" entertainment.

In every period, we see then, the market has played a more fundamental role than that of the place where people met merely to buy and sell.

It has meant enlightenment, civilization. It has also meant gaiety, joy, amusement, people together in a holiday mood.

The cowboy came to town not just to purchase a new outfit but also for the rodeo. A cattle auction remains not only an occasion for selling stock but also for a barbecue and dance. The modern housewife takes the bus into town for a morning of shopping -- and an afternoon at a show.

In the past few decades, however, we have tended to disregard this rich cultural role of the marketplace and concentrate on the science of selling as if it were separated from people.

Now we are again coming to understand that the most effective selling arena is one that provides the customer with more than just goods.

In the present period, with the increased mobility of our people and the increased income, we have developed a new kind of "shopping town". Like the feudal fair, it serves as a magnet, drawing people to it from the surrounding areas because it fulfills a happy variety of social and commercial purposes.

Thus, the modern shopping center has begun to provide the answer to new social needs -- the gigantic leap in population, the new monied, suburban middle class, the automobile as a means of conveyance -- but there is a lag in the recognition of its basic function. It is our feeling that a re-examination of the true role of the marketplace will reveal new potentialities for the retailer.

Two city supermarket windows—object lesson in how to disregard the shopper.

THE CUSTOMER LOOKS AT EFFICIENCY

Mr. Martin, who runs a country grocery with the aim of making every customer a personal friend...

There is always something very appealing about robots which can take over the unpleasant, arduous and time-consuming jobs. At first glance the vista of a push button mechanism that will take over a routine, daily chore is irresistible. Thus, when we first heard that there is serious research going on at a major network regarding a closed-circuit plan which will enable television viewers to do their shopping from an easy chair, we were intrigued. As designers who are vitally concerned with new concepts that solve old problems in a fresh manner, and as ordinary consumers whose wives might soon eliminate a major chore, we felt the potential effect of this development deserved consideration.

But while retailing through television equipped with automatic ordering devices may have some success in the future, we don't believe it can seriously affect more fundamental methods of retailing. Its weakness will not lie in any mechanical shortcomings but rather in the simple fact that people enjoy shopping. (See Design Sense, June, 1956) Your wife finds pleasure and satisfaction in a routine that calls her away from the house into direct contact with other human beings. Also, she prefers a shopping situation where she can rely on her own immediate responses to the color, shape and feel of the products she is thinking of purchasing.

It would be foolish to deny -- or for that matter, not to support -- the trend to automation in retailing. We confidently expect that within the next few years supermarkets, variety stores and drug stores will install batteries of automatic vending machines to sell high-demand, low-profit items at night, Sundays and holidays. Automatic handling of merchandise is a great boon to stores faced with rising volume, higher costs and shrinking mark-ups. Engineered receiving, storing and shipping of merchandise as well as handling stocks within stores is resulting from new developments in communications and conveyor systems, lift trucks and storage facilities.

Personal relationship and guidance—what the larger store often lacks and must acquire

1. toyshop owner sells a crib to three generations

2. hardware proprietor absorbedly demonstrates new plane

3. local M.D. relaxes at noon by sharing hobby with sports store salesman

All these things are great advantages when they are developed as something that leads up to more efficient and pleasant buying circumstances for the customer. But it would be a grave error, and contradictory to the consumer's demands, if the marketplace function is completely replaced with a push-button buying system. You can't ask advice from a gravity feed. It's awfully hard to get emotionally involved with a vending machine -- except negatively.

Lest we be suspected of wanting to stop the progress of our mechanical marvel of a civilization, let us categorically state at this point that this is not the case. We welcome the changes which are increasing the efficiency of retailing, cutting costs, providing greater variety to the consumer, et al. But if there is one lesson to learn from the history of the past decade, it is that we cannot expect advances in retail automation to be meaningful, if in the course of achieving it we lose the customer. In the midst of automation we must also achieve humanization. If we are cutting down on human error and human sales clerks, we must somehow replace their virtues with other elements of our planning.

The retail market is an exciting, vital place, whose vitality comes from its social role. The consumer wants it to have this role, and even now complains (and demonstrates by withholding his patronage) of the loss of warmth, and personal contact which the average supermarket has brought him. The further we go in mechanization, the louder the protests will be, unless we give an increasing measure of attention to using the many possible ways of making the store fulfill the needs and desires of the consumer.

HOW MANY CUSTOMERS ARE YOU LOSING?

Volumes of statistics are published monthly on the tremendous sales being made through mass marketing methods. Eloquent photographs in the business press testify to the crowds in department store areas where robot devices have replaced floor selling; to the mountains of merchandise in orderly chain hardware store self-service displays. We are told how many thousands of dollars were checked out through five cash registers in a day; how many people moved through the aisles.

A still small voice asks "But how many sales got away?"

A discount house, for example, is frequently cited as a successful illustration of mass marketing without "frills". The only attraction is price, and to maintain the low price not only is the environment that of a "factory of distribution" but the limited sales personnel is deliberately cold in a calculated attempt to get the customer out fast.

Just the other day, an engineer we know was asked by his wife for help in an expedition to a discount house to acquire a new vacuum cleaner. Once there, jostled against the wall where the machines were, the couple considered a group of several competitive models, all without informative labeling or display material. Although he knew appliances quite well, our friend found his engineering knowledge of small use in examining the cleaners on the basis of external design alone. Confused and exasperated, the couple was just about to leave the discount house and go to a large department store where they could get someone to explain the relative merits of the machine to them, when a salesman asked if he could help. "We can't see any great difference in any of these machines", our friend said to him, "But the Hoover is supposed to be a pretty good machine. The only thing is all the others have wheels and that makes it easier to use. Why doesn't the Hoover have wheels?"

"You don't need wheels -- it floats on a column of air", said the salesman. With that simple statement and a brief demonstration, the sale was made.

How many customers decide it's too hard to choose a vacuum -- or an iron, or a radio -- and go out to buy a hat or toys for the kids instead? There is true discretionary buying power for the consumer today. People don't really have to have many of the things they buy, and when buying becomes difficult or makes them feel inadequate, they can exercise that discretion and buy something or somewhere else.

If you are going to dispense with the salesman who, even in a discount house, can save a sale with a few right words, you have got to realize

the plight of the consumer today. He has accumulated a great new load of of self-doubts and insecurities. With his new larger income, he has new responsibilities (particularly if he is a suburban homeowner) and he must make his purchases from a far wider range of competitive products than ever before. Buying is made harder when you take away the reassurances he wants. Self-service devices make purchase decisions more difficult because he is so on his own.

Elsewhere in this issue we've discussed the problem of automation of retailing, and its effect on the marketplace function. The story we've told above has a very direct relationship to this problem. The discount house has carried "scientific selling" to a logical conclusion. If retailing is merely the exchange of goods or services for money, then the outlet that gives the best price must prosper. Yet, as we have seen, and as the successful discount operators have come to realize, when you rob the retail sales arena of its marketplace function, you begin running into sales trouble.

Here the sale was not made by the price. The consumer needed more than the product. He needed information, reassurance, an explanation which was meaningful to him, and attention. He was, in short, not a buying machine, but a person!

This doesn't mean that the salesman is necessary to provide these elements. (Although in certain areas of retailing he is essential). Rather it demonstrates that where the most advanced approaches to retailing are applied - whether it be discount house selling, or the automatic supermarket - the retailer will lose customers unless he supplies the essential gratifications of the marketplace in addition to goods.

STORE PERSONALITY... it's Vital to Have a Good One

One way of talking about the marketplace function is to mention "store personality". People tend to, and like to, respond to stores as if they had human characteristics and it's the particular pattern of personality which your store has which may be the key to the attraction or block that your store has for the consumer.

If yours is a big store where thousands of items are available, the consumer may judge it as impersonal, cold, fatiguing. The total impression he has of a big store may be even hostile -- he may see you as a mean, close-fisted giant out to snatch pennies from him, setting traps for his uncalculated "impulse" purchases.

On the other hand, it is possible to build a selling personality right into your store with planned store design. Through design you can surround the shopper with an atmosphere of pleasant style and taste that gives him self-confidence and renews his sometimes flagging estimate of himself as one who knows where to shop, what to buy. Without human sales help, through store design, display, better packaging, informative labelling, etc., it is possible to educate and inform and to create order to reduce his confusion.

High Style at Low Overhead – New "personality" for country's largest clothing chain is evident in recently opened Falls Church, Va., store. L&M designed prototype to attract suburban market (in this case, Washington, D. C.) using basic one-story cement block structure of Robert Hall's earlier stores, but swapping clothing factory surroundings for open-looking, ranch-style contemporary styling. The new stores prove it is possible to achieve high style even when you use such low cost materials. The designers avoided a supermarket appearance of empty glass and steel as a style that has run its course – sought, instead, a more intimate, warmer design, featuring window display space under a generous canopy.

Pipe racks, symbol as well as method for a low overhead policy, remain, but in stores where fashionable color, interesting texture and airiness of design take away stigma.

Design departure from glass front gives shopper greater feeling of privacy. Large windows steal space, used here for selling.

But use of glass in clerestory strip gives light, open quality to store– despite bare-staged merchandising techniques, customers find atmosphere comfortable, enjoyable.

Robert Hall believes the young suburban family is more discriminating—wants to feel pride in the stores in which it shops . . .

and find shopping easy and pleasant. Costly fixtures, elaborate displays aren't always necessary to suggest fashion—here the colors, pinks, charcoal, blue green and burnt orange, carry the load.

Stress, in the family clothing store, is on the casual. A shopping expedition doesn't mean dressing up . . .

or leaving the children at home.

Everyone comes along. You drive over to buy a new suit

or dress in the same everyday way you would to go out to load up on groceries. It's a serious business making a decision but there is no swank to make the shopper feel inferior, uncomfortable. The atmosphere is friendly—

Robert Hall seems to have attained the kind of store they sought—one where everyone participates.

MOTIVATION BY DESIGN

New color slide film produced by L&M is a challenging presentation on contemporary product development and design—**available on request** for showings to management groups, advertising agencies and schools.

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Lippincott & Margulies, Inc., Industrial Designers, 430 Park Avenue, New York

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